

CONQUEST OF DECENT WORK DURING TIMES OF CRISIS: THE EXPERIENCE OF AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL WORKERS IN URUGUAY AND ARGENTINA

Dina Feller, Teresa Conrow, Mario Librán

University of Buenos Aires (Argentina), UCLA (USA), ACTAU (Association of Air Traffic Controllers' of
Uruguay)

mqino21@gmail.com dinaperlafeller@gmail.com tconrow2@gmail.com

**Paper prepared for presentation at the
"8th Conference of the Regulating for Decent Work Network"
on Ensuring decent work in times of uncertainty
at the International Labour Office Geneva, Switzerland
10-12 July 2023**

Abstract

Two different air navigation services unions, in Uruguay (ACTAU) and Argentina (ATEPSA), were able to overcome the challenges posed by a history of military control in the industry; deep economic crises in both countries; repressive essential work laws; and the crisis of the Covid pandemic. The power resources approach to union transformation shows that trade unions are not solely at the mercy of major societal trends and crises, but rather they have the option of making strategic choices.

Air traffic control workers are key to the viability and safety of global transport value chains. These workers hold the moment-by-moment responsibility for the protection of human life. They work extremely long hours with heavy workloads, poor conditions and are paid far below other comparable professions. The work of air traffic controllers is highly regulated by national and international laws and requires extensive training. Air traffic controllers are recognized by the ILO as one of the occupational groups with the highest occupational stress. Due to its essential public service nature, labour disputes require mechanisms for self-regulation

During the Covid pandemic, commercial passenger flights declined or stopped, while the number of cargo flights expanded. The workload of air traffic controllers increased as they dealt with massive changes in flight patterns and scheduling. Essential worker laws were used to deny aviation workers of their fundamental right to strike, organise, and bargain.

The three authors have extensive direct knowledge of and participatory research experience with aviation unions in South America. The research was conducted between 2017 and 2022 and includes 560 hours of interviews with workers, trade union, and governmental representatives.

The authors examine how, during these times of crisis, the unions revitalized themselves, increased their organisational power and democratic structures, learned from each other, won groundbreaking improvements in working conditions, and developed a strategy of impacting global value chains using safety regulations to protect the public, flight crew members, and themselves.

Keywords: air traffic controllers, essential services, labour disputes, power resources approach, trade union cooperation

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This work is dedicated to our air traffic controller comrades in PATCO, who 40 years ago went on a strike in the United States that forever changed the way the industry was organised, and to the air traffic controllers of USCA in Spain who 10 years ago resisted the repressive forces of the state in the workplace. We also dedicate this work to our Latin American and Caribbean comrades who resisted and continue to resist abuses in the Dominican Republic and Paraguay and who have managed to get back on their feet. Finally, we dedicate this work with great commitment to our brave Mexican air traffic controllers who continue to fight against unjust and discriminatory dismissals. And finally, to all aviation workers who continue working in a pandemic, risking their lives in precarious conditions, who have fought in the past and who are fighting in the present, and who want to fight for a future for dignified employment and safer aviation for all.

INTRODUCTION

ACTAU (Asociación de Controladores de Tránsito Aéreo del Uruguay) and ATEPSA (Asociación de Técnicos y Empleados de Protección y Seguridad a la Aeronavegación) are two trade unions representing the same aviation sector, air traffic controllers. They do so in two neighbouring countries, Uruguay, and Argentina respectively. Both organisations share a similar history. In the last 5 years, both organisations have travelled a path together at different speeds to transform and revitalise their unions.

Air traffic controllers are the professionals in charge of flight safety. Every time a plane takes off and lands, highly qualified and trained air traffic controllers are required to meet international safety standards and regulations. Due to this level of responsibility, air traffic controllers are considered by the ILO as one of the labour groups with the highest occupational stress (Costa, G. 1995). The ILO has issued a series of resolutions through its committee on freedom of association, limiting the right to strike in this labour sector due to its essential public service nature and requiring alternative mechanisms to resolve industrial disputes (Knabe and Carrion Crespo, 2019).

The air traffic control unions in Uruguay and Argentina have reinvented a strategy of effective industrial pressure that is outside of the traditional strike. These creative tactics are centered around democratic union decision-making mechanisms that directly involve the workers who will carry out the new strategy. This strategy requires good alliances with passengers, users, and the general public,

and with airlines and government/decision-makers who are willing to engage in more effective social dialogue during this time of crisis within the aviation industry.

The aviation unions in South America have created a long-term sustainable international network of unions, known as the ITF South America Network of Aviation Unions. The unions have nurtured and grown a safe space for sharing in detail and with great precision the repression that workers face “in the name of legality” in their airports and towers, as well as the skills and strategies they have developed to reverse it. (Feller and Conrow, 2017)

The Power Resources Approach (PRA) frame our heuristic research and analysis. Moving away from the standard depiction of unions as victims of globalisation, PRA acknowledges that unions have agency and power - even as the labour movement is under attack and air traffic controllers face retaliation, individually and collectively, every time they attempt to improve conditions. (Schmalz, Ludwig, Webster 2018)

The article examines how two apparently very different organisations, with historical and organisational points in common, were able to get out of the doldrums of union despair, hopelessness, and apathy. How did they find a way to improve their capacities to bargain collectively and to generate pressure within legal frameworks, without having traumatic consequences for the workers and their unions?

The paper describes in detail the methods and tools that ACTAU forged and ATEPSA further developed to exert pressure on decision-makers. We will look at the technical configurations of the tactics and the reactions of each country, government, and employer.

Finally, we look at how organising transport workers and specifically in the aviation sector, requires a commitment to internationalism. Union participation in regional and international working bodies is a key element of global struggles that are situated in local geographies.

ACTAU AND ATEPSA: Two Banks of the Same River

Río de la Plata divides Argentina and Uruguay. On both sides you will find cultural similarities in food, language, love for football and a strong trade union culture. The river that flows in between contains the same waters of neoliberalism, privatisation, and social fragmentation. The unions in both countries have a common history of solidarity and geography: “adjacent air space”. They are neighbours that share the same international aviation rules. Although the two unions have a common background, their structures are different, and they had very minimal interaction before 2018. After 2018, the two

unions were able to work together and build the confidence to trust and learn from each other and use the same successful strategy to win major improvements in working conditions.

The Uruguayan Air Traffic Controller's Union

ACTAU is the Uruguayan Air Traffic Controllers Association. It represents air traffic controllers at airports throughout Uruguay. It has about a hundred members with a membership rate of 89% of which 30% are women.

ACTAU combines both the professional and trade union aspects of the air traffic controller's work. Today there are no other associations or unions representing air traffic controllers in Uruguay. The union is part of PIT-CNT (Central Única Sindical del Uruguay) (Unique Uruguayan Central Union) through COFE, which is the Confederación de Organizaciones de Funcionarios del Estado (Civil Servants Organization Federation) and a member of the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF) and International Federation of Air Traffic Controllers Associations (IFATCA).

The ACTAU was created in 1958. At that time aviation was regulated by the Directorate of Civil Aeronautics which was dependant on the Ministry of Transport. During the 1977 military government air traffic regulations were shifted to depend on the Defense Ministry, where they still remain, despite this being against the Uruguayan Constitution. The union has had to negotiate with a "public-military corporation" for more than 45 years through various governments and levels of democracy.

During the 1990s, the air traffic controllers, through ACTAU, made fundamental improvements, such as the creation of a special pension scheme. However, "whatever was achieved through collective bargaining was so precarious and transitory that it was not even signed and the union did not push (for signatures)".¹ According to the ACTAU, verbal agreements on improved working conditions were made during this time but there was only intermittent adherence. The 1990s was a time of growing privatisation in the region, including in Uruguay where PLUNA, the Uruguayan flag carrier airline, was on the list of companies to be privatised.

¹ Interview of former ACTAU President in 2022

In the 2000s, ACTAU members were not isolated from the deep economic and social crisis that marked an era of high unemployment and precarious jobs. In 2002 alone, unemployment in Uruguay rose to 17% and a banking and economic crisis² engulfed the country. The profitable airports where air traffic is denser (Carrasco in Montevideo, Laguna del Sauce in Punta del Este) were sold to a private consortium. Since then, there have been repeated attempts to privatise the Air Navigation Services in Uruguay, so far without success.

During the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s, controllers held up to three jobs simultaneously to make ends meet. The controllers lived in a climate of terror and persecution with permanent, unclear, and arbitrary disciplinary proceedings that resulted in job instability. "In the years leading up to the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, there were two major exoduses of controllers, in 2004 and 2008, groups of young controllers left to work in South Africa, leaving the Uruguayan air traffic service with a labour shortage and an aged workforce.

The ACTAU "went through changes in the union's Steering Committees resulting in an increased level of compromise with the employer. Many workers aligned with the vision and strategy of an individual leader who made a series of very bad strategic decisions resulting in numerous defeats for the workers, leading to the creation of the May 2007 decree of essential services, which succeeded in preventing the union from striking. Workers lost all hope and apathy grew."

In 2007 management had been determined to proceed into an unprecedented level of conflict. The union assembly of workers voted to strike for an indefinite period of time and provided only minimum on-call services. They were seeking improvements not only in wages but also in job stability, a career plan, and a written enforceable collective bargaining agreement. The ACTAU Executive Board announced airspace closures, bringing the negotiations to a head. The aeronautical authorities put pressure on the government, most strongly on the Ministry of Defence, to decree by law the essential nature of the air traffic service before the closures could be implemented. The air traffic controllers were notified of the new legal decree and were forced to go to work without being able to exercise their planned strike.

The "declaration of essentiality" enabled the government authorities to legally strip the air traffic controllers of the right to strike. In Uruguay, the essential services law mandates that, every time the Government decreed essential service, a round table has to take place in order to restart the dialogues.

² <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/2162956.stm>

The weak part of the law is that it mandates the dialogue but does not ensure the results. Once the union has no more strike power, the Defense Ministry almost disappears from the process. The result was to deepen the controllers' collapse even further into ruinous working conditions and a huge loss of credibility in the union, the only tool the workers believed they had to exert any pressure.

After the declaration of essentiality in 2007, the union began a process of degradation and chaos. There were constant resignations of members and leaders and any recovery from the coup seemed impossible. In 2008, the union leadership finally decided to call an assembly to dissolve the union. Those who called the assembly could not even manage to gather a quorum of 5 members to sign the minutes of closure and deregister the union. Apathy and fear had won the battle and ACTAU could not even dissolve itself.

Between late 2008 and 2009, a group of 6 or 7 members "who had a very good reputation among their colleagues³" took over the executive committee and organized a worker assembly that was able to authorize them as the new leadership. The goal was to put the union back on track. The leaders asked for a commitment from the comrades in return, and with this new pact they began to meet periodically and make decisions and changes.

First, ACTAU leaders held meetings and built relationships with all levels of public administration, both civil and military, and also with the different actors in the airline industry, the Ministry of Labour, customs, airport concessionaires, PLUNA (the national flag airline), and even the ICAO (International Civil Aviation Organization). With the 2007 decree of essentiality fresh in their minds, and a greater level of understanding of the legal frameworks and the decision makers, the union knew that they had to change their strategy in order to exert pressure and restore the union's power.

"The cornerstone of the strategy of how to avoid a new essential service decree was to examine what would happen if take-offs were delayed. Without take-off, the government could not demonstrate any negative safety impacts while the aircraft was on the ground. However, we did not know what would happen and if the government would adhere to the internationally accepted safety standards and respect the law⁴."

³ Interview of ACTAU former President in 2022

⁴ Interview of ACTAU former President in 2022

This action by the union was not a strike as anyone had ever conceived it. The union did not announce the closure of airspace. Instead, they announced the suspension of take-offs. Everyone went to work on time. The action consisted of something very simple, not clearing take-offs. Initially, many union members and some of the management were incredulous that this measure could affect operations in any way. Workers called the strategy half-hearted, predicted that it would not have any effect and that they all risked making fools of themselves. However, the 'ground stop' strategy, as well as having the advantage of preventing any operational safety risk by providing advance notice of the dates and times of the measures, had a series of complementary elements that turned a strategy of dubious potential into a resounding success, despite efforts of the government and the media to press back against the workers. One key element was the full participation of the workers in the decision making around the strategy. The second key element was long term carefully cultivated relationships with the public and key decision makers. Without these critical elements the strategy may not have been successful.

The plan to announce the ground stop strike was preceded by a transformation in the union's communications methods. ACTAU began by improving the relationship between the union leaders and members. The union leadership ensured that unlike in the past, all decisions were clear and transparent, and decisions were made with full explanations of the reasoning and conditions, particularly decisions regarding the management of the union resources and expenses.

"It was considered essential to communicate constantly with the members through the electronic media and printed material. Reports were prepared for distribution at the worker assemblies, and included all actions taken in the period between the assemblies, with a copy for each member present. Using email, communications were sent after each meeting of the union leadership, worker assembly, and all union events. The communications were drafted by one of the participants and checked by the rest, always trying to ensure that there was as little delay as possible between the meeting and the sending of the communication. We always worked in this way on the understanding that the absence of communication is interpreted by the members as an absence of activity (...)"⁵. These changes radically transformed the dynamics of the worker assemblies where decisions were taken, abandoning long-standing past practices, and implementing more efficient methods of communications with clear and transparent mechanisms for decision-making.

⁵ Interview of ACTAU former President during 2008-2009 in 2022

In 2010 the union workers assembly approved the very first non-authorisation of take-offs (known as 'ground stop') and announced them to the public and to all decision-making bodies in the industry including regulators and operators. The result of this first conflict in 2010 was a new negotiated clause that working conditions would not be worsened.

Over time, the union won a major achievement, the recognition of ACTAU as the undisputed representative of the air traffic controllers. Other improvements included a professional career plan to eliminate inequalities in the workforce, the first significant wage increase in 20 years, and a revision of working hours and overtime which reduced the monthly workload from 160 to 144 hours"⁶. In 2011, the union achieved a substantial increase in wages and saw a drastic drop in the number of their members who were moonlighting for other jobs.

The union prepared for bargaining in 2012 by seeking to set the working day at 12 hours and establishing a complete stop to day to night rotations within the same month. The union's demands were backed up with research and support from the Uruguayan Medical University. The union won both of these demands, which forced the hiring of additional air traffic controllers and greatly improved the quality of life of controllers who had been experiencing the negative health impacts of alternations in their circadian rhythms.

In 2015, the union leadership stepped back due to "internal tensions and the logical wear and tear of so many years of intense struggles"⁷ as well as the lack of participation of members and the constant siege of an intense minority of members who sought personal benefits, sapping the organisation's strength.

In 2016, a new board of directors took over the management of the union. The new leadership used the 'ground stop' strategy and was able to win wage increases and reductions in working hours. During the ground stop action this time the government applied an illegal salary retention to the union members. The deduction in salaries was a new attempt to destroy the legitimacy of the union and its ground stop strategy. The workers received deductions on the day of the ground stop strategy when they were not on strike, as if they were on strike.

⁶ Interview to ACTAU member in 2022

⁷ Interview to ACTAU member in 2022

The illegality of these deductions was so clear that the ACTAU paid the workers for the lost money with union funds, confident that the union would recover the money at the time of the signing of the agreement. Because of years of being responsible with the union income, ACTAU were able to pay to all the members the same amount that the government had taken. In the end, the government was forced to give back all of the money to ACTAU as part of the new collective bargaining agreement.

The following year, in 2017, a new conflict took place because the government wasn't implementing the agreement signed in 2016. Far from feeling overwhelmed, the union took this as an opportunity to improve the last years agreement and also win some new achievements. From the very first month the deductions were made in the pay of workers who participated in the no take off strategy actions. With confidence built from the previous year, the ACTAU decided once again to cover the deductions for union members for 4 months. The new agreement included better and clearer distribution of on call and overtime hours, a security clause for sickness and pregnancy and improved training and career ladder benefits. There were no economic losses for the union or the ACTAU's members.

Every year from 2010 to 2017, the ACTAU exerted pressure during the negotiations using the same "ground stop" strategy. Each time the strategy was made public and disseminated as far in advance as possible. It is important to consider that from the first measure in 2010 to the last one in 2017, the aviation industry experienced many changes as well as many challenges in the economic conditions of the country. Throughout this time, the "ground stop" strategy improved through better communications with airlines, other key decision makers, and the public.

Once the decision was made to initiate the 'ground stop' measures, the schedule was immediately communicated to the airlines and the airport concessionaire companies. These companies were responsible for putting pressure on the decision makers to resolve the conflict. ACTAU became the authoritative professional voice of Air Traffic Services, recognised by the government and the society as a whole. The prestige of the organisation in professional terms went hand in hand with the strength of the trade union actions and they reinforced each other.

Public opinion turned in the union's favour the moment they began to announce the 'ground stop' measures generously in advance. The union was able to put users on alert so that airlines could and did make changes to the flight schedules. This tactic of the union, which appeared to be a gesture of weakness, turned out to be a real strength, because firstly, the natural enemy of the aviation union

actions, the passengers, ceased to be victims and became allies, and secondly, the responsibility for settling the conflict was put clearly in the hands of the employer.

Every time the ACTAU leadership was summoned, the representatives showed up with the same coordinated collective position. In every instance, it was clear that ACTAU wanted to negotiate, and the strategy and actions were fully endorsed by the members and leaders. No one could question the union's willingness to negotiate. This gave a profound legitimacy to each demand and to the union's actions.

Public opinion itself changed its attitude towards the "declaration of essentiality", seeing that it was not a collection of "crazy people with power who had to be disciplined⁸" but rather a team of professionals who had reasonable and coherent claims and demands that had to be met for the common good and in the interests of air safety and the country's goals.

The legitimacy of the measures grew thanks to the impossibility of applying a "declaration of essentiality" since there were no surprise measures and all the air traffic controllers went to work "normally". The "ground stop" strategy expanded along with the union's capacity, cohesion, and strength with each year.

From 2017 to date, the union has not needed to implement the 'ground stop' strategy. After internal discussions, the union has decided to share the strategy with other air traffic controllers, transport organisations and unions so that others can benefit. ACTAU wants to use its history to show that it is possible to fight and win in the most extreme situations of adversity, with a very small group of committed people who have a well-defined internal communication plan and a negotiation strategy based on clear shared objectives and supported by the workers as a whole.

In 2017, ACTAU made the first contact with the ITF Civil Aviation Union Network project in the region and decided to join the International Transport Federation as a way to help build union power within the region. Several presentations and discussions of the Uruguayan air traffic controller union strategies were held in different countries of the region with dozens of comrades interested in acquiring new tools for workers' struggle.

⁸ Interview to ACTAU member in 2023

"In December 2018 a representative of ACTAU was invited to Buenos Aires to participate in the National Plenary of Delegates of ATEPSA, the Argentinean air traffic controllers union. The objective was to strengthen trade union cooperation and provide the unions with technical tools and strategies developed and tested in Uruguay over the previous decade, at the minimum possible expense, for the growth of the unions, and to build relationships and connections with the people of ATEPSA".

The Argentinean Air Traffic Controller's Union

ATEPSA has existed as a trade union since 1959. The union was born at a time when the air navigation services and communications for civil aviation were provided by military. ATEPSA represents air traffic controllers, technicians, communications operators, and flight plan controllers. ATEPSA became a full member of IFATCA (International Air Traffic Controllers Association) in 1965, affirming from the beginning its commitment to international trade unionism. (Saavedra, 2009)

In Argentina, the periods of resistance to successive dictatorships of the 70s and 80s resulted in punishment and exile for those who raised their voices, not only in aviation but throughout the country. State terrorism left deep scars on the aviation sector. The air traffic controller's union adopted the form of a mutual society until the return of democracy in the mid-1980s.

By the late 80s there was unrestrained corruption and the privatisation of state-owned public companies. In the last two years of the neoliberal Menem presidency, between 1997 and 1999, more people died on board aeroplanes than in the previous 30 years. In those two years alone, 142 people lost their lives in plane fatal accidents. There was a consensus among experts, the aviation community and key decision makers at the time that the series of tragedies were not isolated, or unconnected events and that the responsibility lay with those who felt they were "*the (military) masters of civil aviation*"⁹. The working conditions of those in charge of safety were a reflection of the state of aviation in the country. ATEPSA's voice was weak and largely unheeded amidst a sea of tragedies.

For many years the union demanded from the different administrations and governments that Civil Aviation should be in civilian expert hands. However, it was only in 2007 that the creation of ANAC (Civil Aviation Authority) was achieved through a presidential decree 239 by President Nestor Kirchner. The reassignment of management from military structures to the civilian sphere was eagerly awaited and applauded by most progressive sectors, among them the aviation unions, but highly criticised in the way it was implemented because it did not resolve the problems that the workers had been denouncing for years. There was the disenchantment of having waited years for this moment and then

⁹ Interview of ATEPSA leader in 2022

when the handover came everything remained the same, because the military continued to feel that they had a guaranteed impunity.

By 2011 conflicts were increasing (Cotarelo and Fernández, 2011). The fragmentation of the trade unions in air traffic services created confusion and uncertainty as to who is negotiating the demands of the air traffic controllers. Air traffic controller union representation was disputed between 4 trade unions. Workers tried to organise disruptions by slowing the normal traffic flow at two airports in a wildcat strike. ATEPSA was called to a compulsory conciliation, however the "rebels", not being affiliated or aligned with the union, did not recognise the negotiations, and continued with the stoppages.

In November 2011 a group of air traffic controllers under one of the unions tried to take control of the sector. APTA, representing mechanics and dispatchers in Argentina, worked with some of the air traffic controllers to take action by going on strike and "leaving the planes hanging" but it ended in an even more devastating result. The episode is known as "the 1840" in reference to the number of the decree signed by the newly re-elected president Cristina Fernandez, which returned to the Air Force and the Ministry of Defence the control of air navigation services with the coordination and supervision of air traffic control operations in civil aviation.

The first result of the strike was the immediate militarisation of the workplace (again), with surveillance devices in the workplace, and the criminalization of the group that had carried out the measures. "In the 1840s we controlled with the pointing a gun in our back" is a description shared by a delegate ten years later. The untenable situation dragged on for four years. There were attempts to organise through groups of workers outside the unions, such as the "*autoconvocados*" of the domestic airport in Buenos Aires, who managed to have direct conversations with the Minister of Transport. This group managed to work locally and without formal trade union intervention.

In 2015, the law creating EANA.S.E, the company that now still provides air navigation services, was passed. The staff were transferred from the public sector into a new state-owned company. The almost 1600 workers included in this new transfer are protected against arbitrary dismissal and have labour guarantees. This new 2015 law also continued the "essential" character of the service limiting the workers' rights to protest and ultimately strike.

A few months after the creation of the state owned company EANA.S.E, ATEPSA achieved the first collective bargaining agreement for air traffic controllers in the history of aviation in the country. This marked the beginning of a new stage in which the union is reborn in collective bargaining with a company that adheres to the labour law that regulates private sector employment.

With the political shift in 2015, the neoliberal Macri government launched its plan of flexibilisation and denationalisation of Argentine aviation. ATEPSA participated in the public hearings and mobilisations and brought to the public arena the problems that directly affect operational safety. During 2017 and 2018, the union made public denunciations and formal complaints regarding the lack of enforcement of the bargaining agreement. Negotiations stalled and frustration increased. The union fought for job stability for workers on renewable contracts who had to wait each year for their employment to be renewed. In 2018, EANA S.E. dismissed a woman air traffic controller without just cause. The workplace delegates focused on finding a way to justly reinstate her.

In October 2018, ATEPSA hosted the first ITF (International Transport Federation) organised regional meeting of affiliated unions representing air navigation services, attended by delegations from Mexico, Chile, Paraguay, Brazil, Bolivia and Colombia. This meeting was significant because it was the first time that the air traffic controllers began participating in the established ITF Civil Aviation Union Network in the region. The network of aviation unions had methodically built a powerful culture of openness and trust which included the ability to exchange experiences and difficulties along with commitments of mutual support and assistance.^[8] The first exchange on concrete strategies and actions between ATEPSA and ACTAU took place at the next meeting of the full ITF Network of Aviation Unions.

In December 2018, ACTAU representatives came to Argentina and attended a workplace delegates plenary meeting to explain the 'ground stop' strategy and how the Uruguayans had overcome the successive decrees of essentiality and the limitations to the exercise of their right to strike.

During the ATEPSA delegates' plenary meeting very clear goals were set on a number of issues. That year an air traffic controller had been fired and the union had demanded her reinstatement to work, without any success. The company was also threatening to close all of the flight plan and communications offices, leaving 400 workers out of the system. There was a persecution of 6 air traffic controllers who were unable to work for nine months due to an arbitrary and unfair disciplinary process that was unprecedented.

The Argentina delegates listed and discussed all of these difficulties and the history of ACTAU's revitalization in the midst of crisis. There were important questions raised and high levels of participation. The ACTAU representative, described on a blackboard how the 'ground stop strategy worked, explained the methodology in detail, including the need for high level of participation from the workforce, and answered questions. The delegates first reactions were mostly oriented towards arguing that this Uruguayan methodology would not work for Argentina and that what was needed was a "*forceful strike that shows who is in real control*". One of the delegates recalls that several of

those attending the assembly were talking outside afterwards about how ridiculous it was for “*an Uruguayan air traffic controller to come to Buenos Aires and telling us how to strike*”.

A few months later, in February 2019, ATEPSA created a plan of struggle which included union actions based on the ACTAU experiences, the ‘ground stop’ strategy and increased their communications both with external decision makers and within the union membership.

The first attempt to use the ‘ground stop’ strategy was diluted in internal union debates. However, in the first six months of 2019, ATEPSA was subjected to all kinds of blackmail and extortion by the company and the national government. When the collective bargaining stalled in June 2019, the union announced publicly the schedule of non-authorisation for take-offs, implementing for the first time the ‘ground stop’ strategy. At the same time, the Ministry of Labour suspended the union elections and sought to legitimise an intervention into the union. Other transport unions had already been subject to interventions and their general secretaries imprisoned.

The ‘ground stop’ strategy and press actions had a very high impact. A compulsory conciliation process with the Ministry of Labour helped to protect the workers. By the end, the dismissed colleague was reinstated, the almost 200 workers with renewable contracts were given permanent contracts, and a wage increase above inflation was achieved.

This opened a new stage of growth in the organisation, affirming that only ATEPSA is capable of combining an effective strategic method of pressure at the national level with the support and participation of the membership.

By 2020, the workers of ATEPSA were facing the challenge of the Covid-19 pandemic. They worked throughout 2020 without vaccines, with little access to health protection measures, and in a permanent state of harassment and work stress known as “squeezes”. Another female controller was dismissed. She had 32 years of experience and management was caught saying that she was “already old”. The dismissal raised a wave of solidarity from the women in the union who immediately demanded an end to discrimination and persecution of women in the sector. It was the women delegates who demanded that the fired comrade must be reinstated and that any negotiations that would leave her out was unacceptable.

Within weeks, the negotiations came to a standstill and the company had hardened its position. There was virtually no dialogue with the union. April and May were months of virtual online assemblies and intense debates. A massive survey about the content and priorities for the negotiations was carried out with an unprecedented 450 responses. The union campaign committees and social networks were opened to include general participation from all members. Support and training was given to delegates

to encourage them to have deep conversations among workers about the union, using the 'molecular campaigning' methodology. Molecular campaign is an Argentinean organising methodology based on one-to-one personal conversations and persuasive communications. The union initiated participatory research, digital and social media campaigns to address the conflict, increasing participation throughout the pandemic.

The design and calendar of the 'ground stop' strategy and actions was adjusted to conditions of the pandemic. With commercial flights stopped in Argentina, it was generally considered that air transport was at a complete standstill. However, workers found that there were flights happening even if they were not regular. Most of the flights were cargo and executive flight operations. To everyone's surprise not only had operations for air traffic controllers not decreased, but they were above pre-pandemic levels. During the pandemic, the critical role of aviation for repatriation of citizens to their homelands and the need for the transport of medical supplies and vaccines put the union under even more pressure to build and strengthen their social and media alliances. The union became an ally to those who wanted to ensure that people and supplies were delivered in a safe and timely manner during the pandemic by workers who could ensure their safety. During the 18 days of conflict between 2020 and 2021 there were 20 air freighters affected carrying 800 of cargo tons valued for a million dollars 1,600 executive flights delayed or cancelled and 74 rescheduled flights of regular carriers.

Workers did not need an expert or authoritative voice to know that aviation was not vanishing but was changing. These non-regular flights demanded a much more thoughtful and careful design of the schedule slots for the 'ground stop' strategy, as well as a higher level of coordination with the workers in the flight plan offices who were the front line of the action.

The conflict during the pandemic in ATEPSA was a turning point for the union. The new collective agreement included a 45% of increase for salaries and job stability for those workers who had not been covered (around 30% of the staff) and the reinstatement of the fired air traffic controller sister with all her benefits and seniority recognised. In addition, there is a commitment to implement the ILO 190 Convention against workplace violence and harassment with participation of the union in the design and training of the materials and protocols for air navigation services.

The union was able to use a 'ground stop' strategy responsibly with no retaliation on the workforce, and for the first time implemented the democratic decision making and participatory processes online all during the worst crisis the air transport industry ever seen.

Summary

The methodology used by Air traffic controllers first in Uruguay and later in Argentina to fight back shows that both unions were able to recover and create effective mechanisms of internal democracy under extreme pressure. Unions can win and improve workers lives in extreme conditions when they are able to mobilise and use a strategy that combines their power resources, particularly associational power. (Knäbe and Carrión-Crespo, 2019)

In our case study, both Argentina and Uruguay were able to consolidate alliances with other aviation unions, airlines, and airport authorities to create pressure on the decision maker during the campaigns, increasing the union's societal and institutional power. The unions were also both able to use their structural power effectively despite being constrained by essential services laws curtailing their right to strike.

All forms of power resources are enhanced by increased associational power. The stories of both sides of the same river tell us that there is no limit for collective actions and strategic plans when associational power is the principal fuel and engine.

The communications in both unions improved as the revitalisation process evolved and increased the levels of workers participation in their unions. In Uruguay, ACTAU has now designed a strategic communications manual for their members with the assistance of the University of Republic of Uruguay. In Argentina, along with the regularly scheduled worker meetings held on video call platforms by region and by type of work, two digital worker committees were created, one coordinating the campaign and one specialised in social media. ATEPSA held three virtual workshops on social media campaigning and organising techniques and the invitation was opened to all workers who wanted to participate. The social media work was widely reported in the press and the multiplier effect was clearly visible to all members of the campaign committee, giving enormous credibility to a communications tool that had been alien and under-utilised by the organisation.

ACTAU and ATEPSA are members of regional, sector and national trade union organisations in their respective countries and members of international federations in their sector. These memberships and affiliations are not mere formalities, trips, congresses, and dues payments. The experience of the South American ITF Aviation Union Network has shown the importance of deep long-term connections amongst unions. The international network had built a strong culture of active participation and

openness to share, listen and communicate about new and different experiences and specific conflicts, in all of their difficulties and successes.

International work in the union too often occupies peripheral places on the agenda. It is usually not at the centre of union life but rather perceived as a "luxury" or is used as a system of "reward and punishment". These practices, as commonplace as they are sterile, have diluted the international work of building solidarity and connecting global campaigns, and created a divorce between international activities and rank and file delegates. International work can be alienating, particularly when it reproduces the dynamics of North-South domination.

The world that Covid leaves us is a world with more inequality, with more informal economies and more precarious jobs undermining decent work standards, increasing the oppression of women, and leaving us with a more deteriorated planet, and exhausted social and trade union organisations.

We are called to rethink and evaluate the emptiness of our trade union building and understand why many workers, our missing comrades are not with us. The pandemic is happening, at a terrible cost, with the rich continue to get richer and the workers get poorer. If we workers do not organise collectively using all the power resources at our hands the decline of living and working conditions will continue.

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